

Review: Andrzej Sakson: From Klaipeda to Olsztyn: modern citizens of the former East Prussia, the Klaipeda region, Kaliningrad region, Warmia and Mazury

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REVIEWS



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The monograph of the well-known Polish sociologist and historian Andrzej Sakson (in 2004—2011 Director of the Western Institute in Poznań) summarises the long years of his work on the history and contemporary life of one of the most interesting regions of Eastern Europe, the former East Prussia. The study is based on a huge database of sources (archival and published documents, memoirs and diaries, the ‘verbal history’ materials and press publications) and historiography (articles and monographs in English, German, Polish and Russian are used); the data from various case studies and meaningful personal experiences of the author are processed. He is familiar with all significant publications of the Kaliningrad historians (including the articles of Yu. V. Kostyashov providing a basis for the recent ‘Secret History of the Kaliningrad region’ which A. Sakson probably did not have time to study by completion of his work). All that has created a fundamental work, the likes of which perhaps are difficult to find in the modern historiography.

A. Sakson traces the history of the region during the ‘long’ twentieth century, from the end of the First World War to the present day. The goal of his research is to study the general and special aspects in the development of the territory which at the end of the Second World War was divided between the two (and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, three) states, the postwar period became a major research interest. For obvious reasons, in the characterisation of the post-war period, the greatest attention was paid to the Polish Warmia and Mazury region (about 44 % of the text), a little less, the Russian Kaliningrad region (38 %) and very little (18 %), the Klaipeda area in Lithuania. Russian readers might be interested in the first place in the ‘Kaliningrad aspect’ of that topic, the Polish scientist’s vision with regard to the past and present of the ‘utmost Western’ region.

In the ‘History’ of Herodotus there were nine books according to the number of muses. There have been seven muses who inspired A. Sakson, his research contains this number of chapters. The first one (‘From the old Prussian lands to East Prussia’) provided an overview of the region’s history from ancient times to the First World War (with reliance mainly on the German historiography). The second chapter (‘German, Lithuanian and Polish, East Prussia (1918—1939)’) describes the inter-war period in the region. The author describes the administrative division of the province, the Nazi

regime's actions aimed at Germanizing the land where Lithuanians and Poles compactly lived. Both the inter-war East Prussia and the Kaliningrad region were exclaves after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this example of the reproduction of the historical experience of the territory was repeatedly stressed by the author (s. 35, 42).

The third chapter is called 'The Power and Decline of East Prussia (1939—1945)'. Under 'Death of East Prussia' emphasis is put on the East Prussian operation of the Red Army. In describing the escape and evacuation of the province's inhabitants, A. Sakson refers to the analysis of the so-called 'Nemmersdorf syndrome' (s. 112), one of the reasons for the mass psychosis among the local residents. The author describes the facts of the case highlighting specifically the efforts of the Nazi propaganda machine to wake the feeling of revenge among the Germans. The actions of the Red Army in East Prussia are characterised based on the German works, the policy of the Soviet command is described through the formula 'I hate the Germans', and the position of Leo Kopelev, a combatant who protested against the violence against the civilian population and who was arrested by the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) for 'petty bourgeois humanism' was assigned to the 'few exceptions' (s. 115). Much less attention is paid to the Nazi massacre of the Jews in Palmniken (s. 116—117).

The fourth chapter, 'Old and New Residents (1945—1950)' begins with the story of the decline of old order and social pattern. The author states that 'the essential element in the formation of local and regional identity of the new inhabitants of East Prussia was their taking up residence, ethnic composition, the policy of the central and regional authorities, the importance of these areas in the national mythology, or attitude to the past especially the German cultural heritage' (s. 121). Outlined is the process of 'Sovietisation' of the three regions in which new administrative structures were established; the circumstances of life and deportation of the German residents were presented in detail. Resettlement campaign were organised all over in the former East Prussia (due to almost total population change in Klaipeda, the author introduces the concept of 'zero year' in relation to 1945 (s. 121, 125), and everywhere the Communist authorities were facing generally the same problems. In many ways the attitude of immigrants towards the land was similar. New residents of Klaipeda reacted to the cultural heritage without any reverence: the looting of churches, felling of old trees for firewood, grazing on the Lutheran cemeteries (s. 127). In the Klaipeda region, Kaliningrad region and some cities of Warmia and Mazury (e.g. Braniewo) resettlement meant 'ruralisation'; villagers used to come from different regions of the USSR and used to add elements of the rural life to the city's everyday life. Development of Klaipeda and Kaliningrad quickly took on a special character (unavailability of the cities for foreigners was due to their specific port and military nature). Talking about the history of the 'Kaliningrad' Germans, A. Sakson usually follows the conclusions of German and Russian authors. The history of formation of the new Polish territory is described in detail, the drama of relationships between the old and new residents, the so-called 'elimination of the Prussian spirit'. In general, despite all the differences, expulsion of the Germans from the former East Prussia fitted into the overall Eastern European deportation of representatives of the country which had lost the war.

The fifth chapter ('The Difficult Process of Intergrowth, the Period of Real Socialism (1950—1990)') is devoted to the era of real socialism. The author states that the development of the land acquired by the Lithuanians (separately discussed is the problem of localisation of Lithuania Minor) and the Poles was accompanied by a kind of historical mythology (s. 265). The lapidary description of the socialist development of Klaipeda is followed by a detailed presentation of major milestones of the Soviet history of the Kaliningrad region. The author begins with a discussion about the region as a 'benchmark for *homo sovieticus*', the establishment of such type of society was favoured by a number of factors. These included the closed nature of the region, and the spirits and age of migrants, the lack of Orthodox shrines in the region and squeezing-out the German heritage. The Stalin's policy played a certain role, and the author compared the plans of the Soviet and Nazi ideologues who strived to create a new type of society in the occupied territories (s. 293). Reviewed was the process of transformations of the economy (especially the establishment of collective farms and state farms), the Soviet town-planning policies and (in relation thereto) the policy in relation to the German cultural heritage. A detailed description of the history of creative intellectuals' protests against the demolition of the Royal Castle in Kaliningrad, the *case study* allows to avoid monotony, which is so typical of those who reduce all the diversity of civil behaviour to conformism, in the description of the Soviet social reality. The author summarises his thoughts about the 'benchmark region' as follows, the 'efforts to create a 'new man' in the ruins of the past have a negative result. The Kaliningrad region over time evolved into a region enchained by apathy and subjected to a *one-size-fits-all policy*. It also represents the anomaly in the post-Soviet space, a 'Soviet system reserve' (quoted words of the German historian A. Kossert. — *I. D.*)' (s. 325).

In the socialist history of Warmia and Mazury (like indeed Poland as a whole) two periods are clearly singled out, Stalinisation (1949—1955) and the gradual de-Stalinisation (from October 1956 to the decline of the 'real socialism') (s. 335). The changes concerned all areas of life; it should be stated separately that it was 1956 when the restoration of the monuments of history and culture (as opposed to the Kaliningrad and Klaipeda regions) started in the Warmia and Mazury (s. 344—345), so the attitude towards the pre-war heritage became an indication of more holistic social changes.

The sixth chapter is the largest one by size, and it contains almost half a book. Its name is 'Post-migrational Societies in Transformation'. The author begins with a statement of the many similarities in the three regions at the end of the 1980s, a deep civilisational collapse' associated with the decline of the socialist economy, common social diseases (alcoholism, HIV, declining living standards especially in border areas, the high level of unemployment and demographic problems), lack of foreign investment etc.

Those were the most Sovietised areas of Lithuania, Poland and Russia which used to create a lot of barriers for the civil society institutions. However, the researcher believed that younger generations in all the three regions could be characterised by greater openness and tolerance, pro-European and modernisational mindset and readiness to assimilate the unique historical heritage. In the former East Prussia any anti-German (in the case of the Lithuanians and Poles) or anti-Russian sentiments were expressed least compared with other areas of the three states.

The chapter on the Klaipėda region mainly covers the history of the former Memel. The Kaliningrad exclave provided several reasons for the research, i.e. the region's future development scenarios, challenges with regard to the NATO and EU enlargement and specific ways of absorbing the German heritage. The problems of the post-Soviet region are described in detail, apart from the above general social diseases, it also depicted the rapid social differentiation, increased corruption, marginalisation of the rural areas and migration processes. A detailed description of the economic development of the westernmost Russian region goes along with the social and political life stories; there is a part in the book on the 750th anniversary of Königsberg-Kaliningrad and the Kaliningrad well-known demonstrations, the public debates over renaming the region's capital city and the debates around restoring the Royal Castle and the sensational transfer of ownership of the Russian Orthodox Church. In describing the history of Warmia and Mazury the author is not limited by the casus of Olsztyn, he also reviews the impact of socio-economic transformation on the village residents. It was noted that the process was painfully experienced by all the villagers (that was true for all the three regions of the former East Prussia because collectivisation was carried out everywhere in the Soviet period in one form or another. The complicated process of overcoming the new contradictions (the effects of the collapse of the state farms system in Poland were defined by the author as a 'social disaster', s. 591) was proved with the rich statistical data.

The final chapter is titled 'New Identities in the Light of Author's own Research'. The author introduces the reader to the results of the survey conducted in 2005–2006 in the three regions which is also a kind of summing up the whole book. A. Sakson states that the social changes in the last six decades in the Warmia and Mazury, Klaipėda and Kaliningrad regions had their specificity. Post-migrational societies with a unique nature of social interaction developed there. The German population, numerically dominated there before the war (with a few exceptions in the Lithuanian part), was deported from all the regions. The Klaipėda region was different because the rural areas were dominated by the Lithuanians (immigrants from Central Lithuania), and the city was mostly populated by the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians who came from the Soviet Union. The Russians formed the basis of the population in the Kaliningrad region (half of it was concentrated in the regional capital); but the author counted about a hundred nationalities in the amber region. In Warmia and Mazury immigrants used to arrive mainly from central Poland.

The social and economic development in the three parts of the former East Prussia had different dynamics and character. The Klaipėda region and Warmia and Mazury were formed as an integral part of the nation states (including the Lithuanian SSR) with their local flavour. Therefore, the population of those regions was characterised by a high sense of regional and nation-wide identity. The situation in the Kaliningrad region was different, the development of which was largely due to the status of an enclave, the military designation, concentration of the population in the 'capital', ethnic diversity and remoteness from 'big Russia'... Here the level of local and regional identity is lower compared to the neighbouring regions. However, that was true especially for those who came to the area in the first twenty years of its establishment, and their descendants.

The author made some other interesting observations, in all three regions an inverse proportion between the age of people and their level of regional identity can be seen, however this level of the youth (18–25 years) was almost the same. Kaliningrad youth are less attached to their native region due to the exclave nature and peripheral location of the region, the historical legitimacy deficits of territory belonging to Russia, the multi-ethnic composition of the population and unstable policies of the central authorities (s. 758). The hard formation of regional identity in the studied regions forced people to face a variety of barriers, amorphous post-migrational societies, marginalised structures of the nation states etc. It is not only the climate and nature which are common for the residents of Klaipėda, Olsztyn, Kaliningrad and other settlements of the former East Prussia but also the historical past and the memories, the old buildings of a similar type, the common principles of spatial planning of cities and towns and even the communication system in many ways. ‘But above all — sums A. Sakson — most people are united by love for those wonderful places that have become their native land, and once formed East Prussia’ (s. 773).

In general, A. Sakson’s work is an unbiased look at the history of the former East Prussia as at certain integrity. The borders which were established within the space were not completely impervious even in the most difficult times. For several decades, this region was under the influence of totalitarian dictatorships, the author tries to identify the isomorphism of some social and political structures of the two regimes. It should be acknowledged that the concept which describes the Eastern European region (*bloodlands* according to the popular definition of T. Snyder) as an area of the successive totalitarian regimes is quite trivial. Perhaps, such a view lacks profundity; and there is no analysis of the mechanisms of latent resistance of civil dictatorships to supplement the anti-Soviet and anti-communist guerrilla movements. Although it is quite an academic study (following Herodotus, the author objectively describes the Greeks and Persians not seeking to whitewash the Poles or denigrate the Russians or the Lithuanians), bias is sometimes unavoidable. Just one example of a note of A. Sakson which does not sound very convincing, ‘A characteristic feature of the German discourse on expulsion of the German population after World War II is that it is basically limited to claims and bringing charges against Poland and the Czech Republic. But this does not concern France, Russia, Lithuania or other foreign governments which were allies of the Third Reich’ (s. 228). The German discourse on Exile (*Vertreibung*), which finally took shape in the context of the famous ‘historians dispute’ (*Historikerstreit*), is based on a high number of documented evidences (they are studied in a lot of works of German historians including the afore-mentioned A. Kossera) that provide similar claims to all countries including the Soviet Union. However, the general humanistic focus of the Sakson’s work is undoubted; the author illustrates his reasoning always through oral testimonies of ordinary people, Lithuanians, Germans, Polish and Russians. They all tend to talk about the difficulties, hardships, tragedies which is natural because, as noted by many — from Jan Assmann to Franklin Ankersmit — suffering, first of all, makes it possible to have historiography.

In the immense study on eight hundred pages it was impossible to avoid typos and inaccuracies (as is always the case with large projects, from disserta-

tions to encyclopedias). There are minor errors in the 'Kaliningrad' chapters of A. Sakson. Pushkin monument in Kaliningrad was among the traditional Soviet monuments erected in the period of socialism (s. 320), whereas in fact it was only built in 1993. Inaccurate dates are provided when Empress Elizabeth 'owned' East Prussia, 1764—1770 (s. 474), but the Seven Years War is of course meant. The author notes that three astronauts (A. Leonov, V. Patsaev and Yu. Romanenko) were born in the Kaliningrad region (s. 524), in fact, they only spent their childhood there. The writer Vadim Hrappa is named Vladimir (s. 538) (however, this error is carried over to the book of Sakson from the well-known work of P. Broderzen on the history of Kaliningrad). There are some typographical errors in people's names, in the German and Russian names of settlements; the locality name of Granite looks a curious consequence of computer typing (s. 55), probably Ragnit is meant (now Neman). All those minor flaws, however, cannot spoil the generally very favourable impression of the book which is full of interesting and systematic information on the history and contemporary life of the three regions of the former East Prussia.

Are there any opportunities to develop the advantages of the book? Certainly. The study is largely built taking into account the latest trends in historical research over the last fifty years, the author tries to attract the 'oral history' materials and uses the demographic and other statistical information, the social survey results. The potential of the socio-historical research has not been by far depleted as the numerous archival collections in the described cities have not been studied. Of course, the focus of A. Sakson is on the region's history and 'metropolitan' cities (Klaipeda, Kaliningrad and Olsztyn). Far less attention is paid to smaller towns and understandably even less to the villages. At the same time, the social and economic development of communities outside the major cities, of course, has its own characteristics; the microhistorical research of individual settlements could add significantly to the overall picture. What stands out in the research is the imbalance in the distribution of the material, a study of the first post-war five years is one and a half times larger in volume than the chapter on the Soviet period (1950—1990). This imbalance is inherent in the modern Russian historiography of the Kaliningrad region (the vast majority of recent works describe the period between 1946 and early 1950's).

The book by Andrzej Sakson makes a significant contribution to the regional European scale research. It is a serious challenge for the Russian historiography because until now there has been no history of the Kaliningrad region (let alone the neighbouring regions) written at a contemporary research level. There is no doubt that once such a study will be in Russian. However, it is also clear that anyone, who in the future will address the history of the former East Prussia during the 'long' twentieth century, will not be able to ignore the data and conclusions presented in the fundamental work of the Polish scientist.

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